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M

ost of the new houses built in the United States between the end of the first World War and the beginning of the second were inspired in some way, however small or unlikely, by "colonial" American designs derived from 18th-century American or English precedents. During the same period, however, there was also a lively trade in European "romantic" revivals of earlier

centuries — English cottages, Spanish and Mediterranean villas, and French farmhouses.

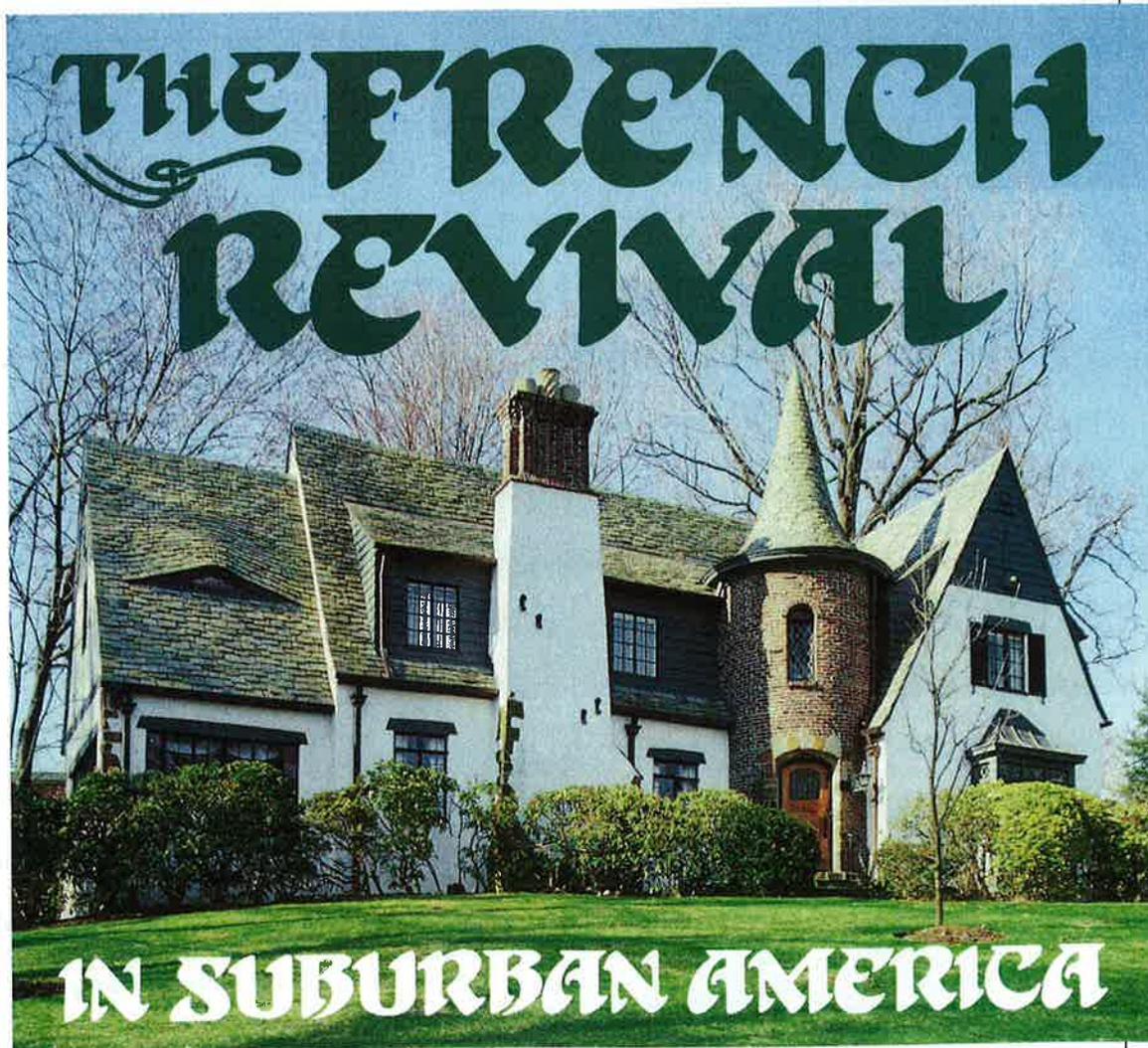
In the years between the wars, two competing approaches to revivals were at work in American architecture. One was formal and academic, continuing the classical Beaux Arts influence of the late-19th and early-20th

centuries. The other was informal and romantic. This second strain was where picturesque elements left over from the 19th century came to rest, and most of the small houses, and many of the larger ones, which we discuss in this article, belong in this second group.

All the romantic styles were characterized by a picturesque quality that laid claim to faraway times and places, to a way of life both exotic and, somehow, simpler than that of the American suburbs to which they were being transplanted. Usually it was a rural ideal that captured the suburban designer's imagination — a half-timbered cottage in an English village, a medieval farmhouse or simple *manoir* in Brittany or Normandy, a sunny villa on some unidentified Mediterranean hillside. But formal townhouses based on chic French city precedents also were popular in their place.

This wasn't the first time Gallic ideas had inspired American buildings. The first wave of the French invasion, a purely regional phenomenon, occurred when French settlers built their raised Creole cottages along the Gulf Coast and up the Mississippi River. The second wave, begun just before the Civil War and signaled by the mansard roofs of the Second Empire style, affected the entire country by the 1870s. A third wave crested in the turn-of-the-century Beaux Arts school of academic classicism. Then, from about 1915 until about 1940, a romanticized, informal French style blossomed, based more on the farmhouse than on the mansion. It was at most an interesting footnote in the history of 20th-century revival architecture, which continued to be dominated by Georgian and Spanish traditions, but it was among the most appealing of the architectural styles of its period.

This French-inspired architecture was as widespread as it was picturesque. After World War I, buildings in the new



An entrance turret in brick makes a strong French statement in this stuccoed Summit, N.J., house.

French style could be found all across the continent. Mass communication and transportation systems made it easy for ideas to travel, and the war had enlarged the architec-

All photos by James C. Massey, except where noted.

tural vision of many Americans. Young artists, architects, and historians who had had their first glimpse of French farmhouses during the war returned to Europe to sketch and study them afterward. Throughout the 1920s, dozens of books such as Samuel Chamberlain's *Domestic Architecture in Rural France* (1928; reprinted by the Architectural Book Publishing Company, Inc., 1981) and historian Harold Donaldson Eberlein's *Small Manor Houses and Farmsteads in France* (1926) were a rich source of ideas

Photo by Richard Longstreth



for designers of small houses. Stanford White's sketches of buildings in Normandy and Brittany also were published in 1920, although they were drawn during a European tour that White made in the late 1870s, before he joined the architectural firm of McKim, Mead, and White.

Although there were still regional preferences — Spanish and Mediterranean houses found their largest audience in the south and west, for instance — all the romantic styles appeared in every section of the country. French-style houses were few, but they might turn up anywhere, even in California or Florida. Unlike Spanish-style *casas*, however, they did not necessarily show up very frequently even in the places they might have been most expected. New Orleans, with its vibrant French heritage, had to wait until the 1960s for a new French building boom. Mostly, the French building boomlet of the 1920s and '30s occurred in suburban areas of large eastern and midwestern cities — with, of course, a detour to southern California, where the style took on distinctly Hollywood airs.

For the sake of easy reference, let's divide all these French-inspired 20th-century buildings into four groups, two formal and two informal. Of the two formal ones, the first is based on a picturesque American version of an early chateau (the equivalent of the English castle), with or without towers. The Thomas T. Gaff House in Washington, D.C. (see page 45), is a good example of this type. The second group — chic, urbane, and academically correct — originates in the Parisian city house. Washington's Meridian House (see page 44) fits this mold. (Meridian House is so correct, in fact, that in 1929 one academic critic pronounced it "free from architectural regrets"!.) John Russell Pope and Jules Henri de Sibour were prominent among the formalist architects.

Then there are two less formal groups: the first, the Norman farmhouse or small manor; the second, an American romantic, eclectic style that draws heavily on the image of French farmhouses but is basically stateless. Many houses of exquisitely picturesque design were built in well-to-do suburbs of Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, and other large cities. Architects like Mellor, Meigs and Howe and Edmund B. Gilchrist in Philadelphia; and Delano and Aldrich in New York were among many around the country who perfected this American form. At the other end of the eclectic scale are the freely interpreted and often charming little houses that were picked up by house-plan and pre-cut-house distributors and local builders all across the nation. The one illustrated in the plate that accompanies this article (see page 43), taken from a mail-order plan catalog, is typical of that group.

As to the characteristics of the style, steep pyramidal or hipped roofs were the norm. Mansard roofs were also fairly often found as were, less frequently, very high gable roofs

Top: The romanticization of the French country house can be seen in this Villanova, Pa., house. **Middle:** Although more restrained, this stucco residence in New Orleans's early-20th-century garden district is also French. **Bottom:** This small New Jersey house features a cut-stone doorway.

Note the round-arched dormer windows with casement sash and wrought-iron balconies of this c. 1930 French eclectic house in New Orleans.



like those on English cottages. The steep roof slopes were originally dictated by the necessity to shed water from thatch coverings, and the custom stuck even after the roofing material changed. All these roof types often were enlivened by a slight kick at the eaves. There was — and still is — a minor thatched-roof revival in its own right, but most roofs of the 1920s and 1930s were of slate or wood shingles.

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ound or polygonal turrets with conical roofs, often used at the front entrance, were intended to lend the air of a small chateau to a suburban dwelling. Usually found at the turn of the L of the building, these towers occasionally showed up at the corner instead.

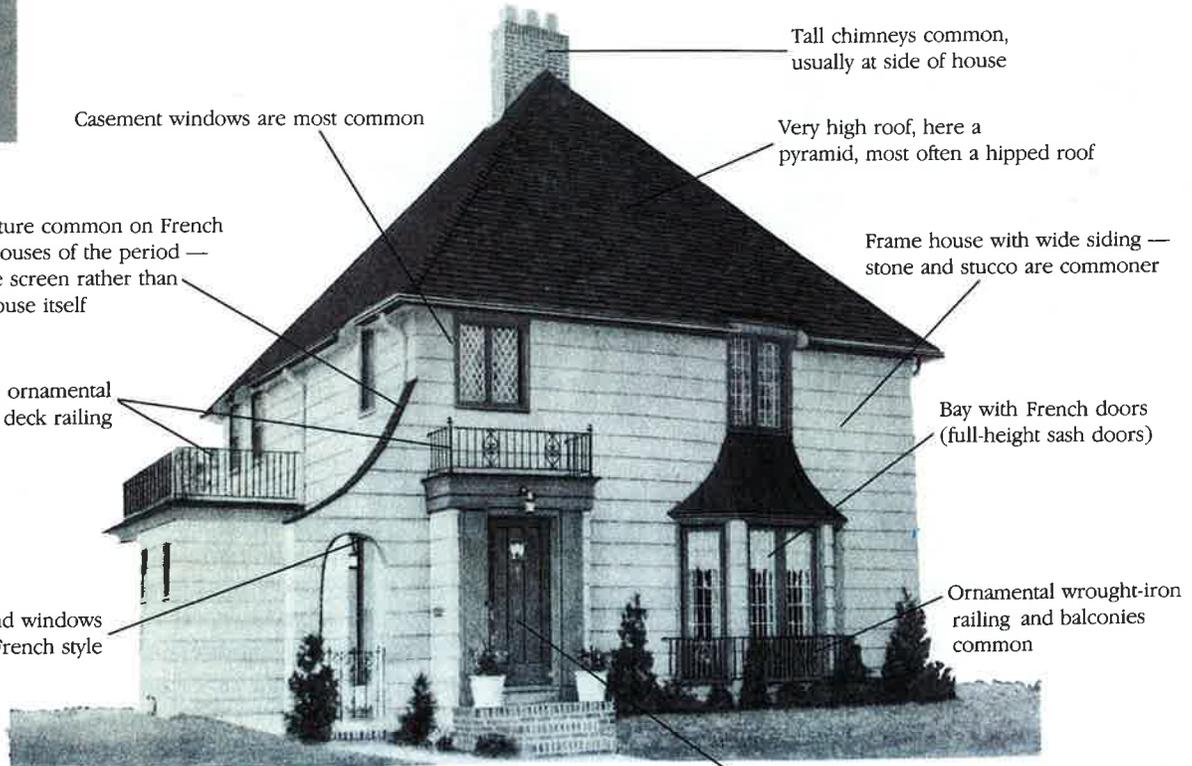
Most French houses were two-storey buildings, although there is an occasional one-storey mansard-roofed version. (These actually have one-and-a-half storeys.) City row houses and some large country houses might have two-and-a-half storeys. In small houses, round-arched entry doors were often protected by flared or polygonal metal hoods. Larger houses might have elaborate wrought-iron and glass marquees. Casement win-

dows, which persisted in France much longer than in England (up to the present day, in fact), were the most characteristic window form. The full-length casement — the popular “French” window or French door — was frequently used both inside and out, but it certainly was not unique to houses of the French Revival style.

The construction material was almost always some form of masonry: stone, stucco over hollow tile or frame, or sometimes brick, which might be whitewashed to suggest great age. Although our illustration for this article shows a small, simple French house in frame construction, very

**READING
THE
OLD
HOUSE**

THE FRENCH STYLE



Casement windows are most common

Tall chimneys common, usually at side of house

Very high roof, here a pyramid, most often a hipped roof

“Catslide” feature common on French and English houses of the period — here a simple screen rather than part of the house itself

Frame house with wide siding — stone and stucco are commoner

Wrought-iron ornamental balcony and deck railing

Bay with French doors (full-height sash doors)

Arch doors and windows common on French style

Ornamental wrought-iron railing and balconies common

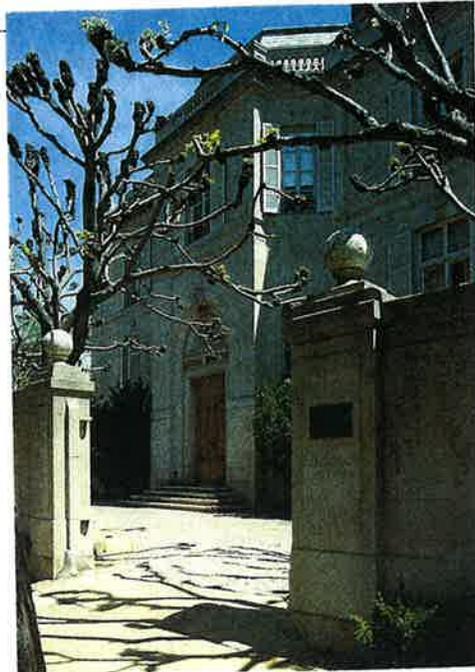
Front door of three vertical panels breaking from English tradition

Source: 1927 Home Builders Catalog, Home Builders Catalog Company, Chicago and New York

Key: Revivals based on a variety of French precedents — farmhouse (especially Norman), manors, city houses, and chateaus of the 17th to 19th century, and expressed in this 1927 design as a small, simple American suburban house.

few all-wood houses were built in this style. There was sometimes (although less often than in the English cottage style) a half-timbered effect, perhaps with vertical framing filled in with stucco, recalling a traditional French form of exposed frame construction, *poteau-sur-sole*. A catalog of the period suggested whisking the stucco on with a stiff brush or broom in an up and down movement to achieve a coarse texture. Other than white, the only stucco color variations allowed by this authority were pearly grays, light buffs, pinks, and yellows.

Often, windows set level with the wall surface rise straight up through the cornice line to form dormer-like projections with round-arch hoods or triangular pediments. Massive chimneys often occupied a prominent position on the front wall of the house, although they appeared more frequently on one side. Ornamental wrought-iron balconies (real or fake), gates, window and door grilles, and marquees are characteristic exterior decorations. Large houses might have wrought-iron railings on the interior as well. The interior appearance of large French style houses was similar to that of Mediterranean examples: rough plaster walls, ornamental ironwork, stone fireplaces. Floor plans for large houses were somewhat more likely to resemble those used in Mediterranean-style residences than those of formal and symmetrical Georgian. French houses were likely to be



Academic influences produced the correctly French Meridian House in Washington, D.C.

asymmetrically laid out in an L-shape or with varied wings, rather than in a single rectangular block.

Small houses (such as those in mail-order house catalogs) often had an L-shaped plan with a round turret at the intersecting exterior walls. But they also presented opportunities for symmetry. An "American adaptation of a small French chateau" shown in the Architectural Corporation's 1919 publication *Designs for American Homes* has a symmetrical facade and a pyramidal roofline. Its nearly square first-floor

plan is identical to that of "a frank copy of a Massachusetts Colonial," which also appeared in the same book: a three-room, center-hall plan with a sunporch at one rear corner filling out the square. It's a thoroughly typical small-house floor plan of the period.

Unlike Craftsman- and Mission-style houses, the French Revival house, at least at the popular level, seems to have had no distinct type of furnishings consistently attached to it. "One may furnish successfully with the usual items available," suggested the Architectural Corporation.

Other experts were more specific, however. Kathryn E. Ritchie and Margaret Haines (writing in "The Normandy Room," *Modern Homes: Their Design and Construction* Chicago American Builder Publishing Corp., 1931) suggested that the type of decoration most appropriate to French-style houses, or at least to those built in the informal, rather rustic mode known as "Norman," was — what else? — "French Provincial." This style, a countrified version of 18th-century French design with Spanish and Italian touches, leaned heavily to rough-hewn beamed ceilings and walls covered with smooth or sand-finished plaster or with wood paneling. Hardwood paneling was usually stained and waxed; softwood might be painted in any of several characteristic shades: daffodil yellow, apple green, lemon, pinkish or yellowish gray, or white. Wall



French or English? **Top left:** This Washington, D.C., house could be a Cotswold cottage — but there's a French kick to the eaves. **Bottom:** This Pasadena house has the French rounded entry door and through-the-eaves dormers.

Right: This turn-of-the-century "chateau" shows a truly Victorian exuberance. **Middle:** At Bryn Mawr, Pa., the French Revival is a starting point for a distinctly American, suburban house style. **Bottom:** Note the steep hipped roof, tall chimneys, and prominent stone quoins of the Thomas T. Gaff House in Washington, D.C.

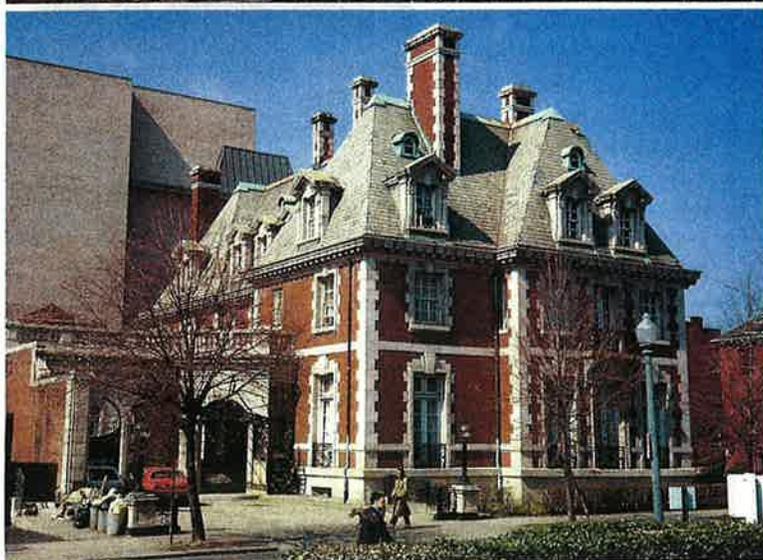
panels often curved at the top and were enriched with low-relief carvings of flowers, birds, leaves, or fruit. (Favorite motifs were turtledoves' nests, the "torch of happiness," and Cupid's quivers — now, is that romantic or what!) Tile or slate floors were typical in provincial France, but in American homes wide boards of pine, cedar, or oak were acknowledged as a more livable flooring choice. Or, it was suggested, linoleum simulations of slate or tile could be used to good effect. A large fireplace "bespeaking heat and cheer" was strongly recommended for the living room, and if you could get your hands on an old armoire and a grandfather clock — preferably a curvy one shaped like a "violoncello" — you were well on the road to the best of French peasant living.

But there's a lingering question that pesters old-house observers: English or French? Tudor or Norman? Without the architect or builder's catalog in hand, it can be devilishly hard to tell the difference between houses based on English cottages of the Middle Ages and those based on French farmhouses of the same period. As a rule (a very general rule), French houses are more likely to have round-arch doors and windows. Steeply pitched roofs like the one pictured in our plate (sometimes called catslides), graced many entrances and bays of small 1920s and '30s houses. Most often viewed as "English" by contemporary observers, they were also occasionally found on houses described as "Norman."

The American romantic style developed by the Philadelphia architects mentioned earlier blended the picturesque features of French and English rural houses with local American building materials to form a distinctive new suburban form. The exact source may be a toss-up, but large suburban "farmhouses" such as those found in Robert Rodes McGoodwin's French Village in Chestnut Hill, Pennsylvania, rank with the most creative 20th-century American architecture.

One of the strengths of the French Revival style was that it accommodated two very different urges on the part of the small-house public. People who were attracted to the formal, symmetrical lines of American Georgian colonial houses but who also wanted a touch of continental chic in their houses might opt for a sort of French box with an off-center doorway and a pyramidal roof. Homebuyers whose tastes ran to picturesque, irregular outlines could break out of the confines of the box with a Norman "farmhouse," with multiple rooflines and eccentric wings.

What killed the style prior to World War Two was probably competition from the Colonial Revival and other re-



vival styles, particularly the vigorous Spanish and Mediterranean. The post-war emergence of new house forms, such as the ranchhouse and the split-level, also did not immediately suggest ways to incorporate French styling. But in another decade or so, however — by the 1960s — the French romantic style would re-emerge with a fresh vitality.

